

COMMUNITY SUPERVISION: BALANCING COMPLIANCE WITH TREATMENT

Question: How do probation officers supervise offenders in the community?

Background: In Canada, nearly 100,000 offenders are under some form of community supervision on any given day. The majority of these offenders are supervised by provincial probation officers with approximately 7,000 supervised by federal parole officers. Probation officers supervise offenders who have been given a probation sentence of up to three years, a conditional sentence, and in some cases, they supervise offenders granted bail by the courts.

Probation officers are faced with many demands. They are expected to ensure that the offender complies with various conditions of the probation order. The courts may impose conditions such as not associating with certain individuals, paying restitution to victims, maintaining a job and attending treatment as directed. Failure to comply with the conditions of probation may require the probation officer to issue a warrant for arrest and bring the person before the court to face breach of probation charges. On one hand, the probation officer has to play an enforcement role.

On the other hand, probation officers are expected to help their clients obtain the

treatment that they may need and learn new pro-social skills. In many provinces, probation officers deliver group treatment programs. They are also expected to provide individual counselling to the offenders that they supervise. This treatment role sometimes conflicts with the enforcement role. A major challenge for a probation officer is finding the right balance.

Method: Sixty-two probation officers agreed to audiotape their supervision sessions with 154 adult and youth offenders (youth are those between the ages of 13 and 17). The audiotapes were coded on a range of variables to capture discussions around compliance with the probation order and the use of therapeutic techniques to encourage pro-social changes in their clients. The information from the audiotapes was then analyzed in relation to offender recidivism three years later.

Answer: The majority of the probationers were male (75%). They had committed an average of 5.8 prior offences. On average, the offenders were seen once every three weeks.

The offenders had a number of problems related to their criminal offending. The common problems requiring treatment were substance abuse, family/marital dysfunction,

unemployment, accommodations, peer problems and criminal thinking. Analyses of the audiotapes found that probation officers mostly discussed family/marital issues and the client's substance abuse; they spent very little time on peer problems and criminal thinking. When officers did spend a significant amount of time dealing with their client's problems or criminogenic needs compared to spending little time on them, the recidivism rates were significantly lower (36% vs. 49% respectively).

The audiotapes were also analyzed with respect to the time spent in the interviews on reviewing the conditions of probation and checking to see if the client was complying with the conditions. The findings showed that when probation officers focused on compliance with the conditions of probation (defined as spending more than 15 minutes in a session on this topic), the recidivism rates were actually higher compared to spending less than 15 minutes on issues of compliance (42.3% vs. 18.9%).

Policy Implications:

1. Community supervision requires a balance between enforcement and treatment. Probation officers need to be careful to not spend too much time on compliance and attend to the treatment needs of offenders.
2. More attention should be directed to the offenders' relationships with peers and their criminal thinking patterns. These two factors are some of the best predictors of criminal behaviour.
3. Training officers to redirect their efforts towards addressing peer and criminal thinking problems may lead to more effective community supervision.

Source: Bonta, J., Ruge, T., Scott, T., Bourgon, G., & Yessine, A. K. (2008). Exploring the black box of community supervision. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 47, 248-270.

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